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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO (CARPENTER)
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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: AN OPPOSITION LEADER'S TAKE ON DEMOCRACY IN TUNISIA

REF: A. TUNIS 840

[1](#)B. 06 TUNIS 2661

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4 b & d

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) The Ambassador met with Mustapha Ben Jaafar, Secretary General of the Democratic Forum for Labor and

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Liberty (FDTL), to discuss Tunisia's political situation, the link between opposition parties and human rights, and President Bush's Freedom Agenda on July 3. Although the FDTL is a registered opposition party, Ben Jaafar noted that the GOT still seeks to control its activities -- most recently when police disrupted a June 29th FDTL event. Ben Jaafar also touched on the threat of Islamic extremism and what aid he feels the United States can lend Tunisian civil society. The Ambassador emphasized USG commitment to freedom and to maintaining close contact with opposition parties and human rights activists. End summary.

Lending a Hand to Democracy

[1](#)2. (C) During his July 3 courtesy call with FDTL Secretary General Mustapha Ben Jaafar, the Ambassador expressed his hope that the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberty (FDTL) and the Embassy can work together to advance freedom of expression and association in Tunisia. The Ambassador shared the text of President Bush's June 5 speech in Prague as a clear statement of the United States' commitment to promoting freedom. The Ambassador emphasized the Embassy's commitment to maintaining close contact with human rights activists and opposition parties, and asked what assistance the FDTL would find useful. Ben Jaafar's response was two-fold. First, he said the Embassy should continue to maintain close contact with the human rights community. Second, he said that civil society would benefit from small but concrete measures, such as advocating the GOT clarify the rules for electoral candidacy well before elections or promoting electoral transparency.

Tunisia Talks the Talk...

13. (C) In response to the GOT critique that opposition parties are weak, Ben Jaafar (the FDTL's Secretary General since it was authorized by the GOT in 2002) responded that despite the government's verbal homage to democracy, he believes the GOT is showing the Arab world how to preach the gospel of freedom while simultaneously denying civil rights. Ben Jaafar added that the public doesn't know his party's platform because the GOT harasses its members and prevents the FDTL from getting its message out. He characterized the FDTL as a "tolerated opposition party," noting that at a recent FDTL event (a June 29 seminar on Freedom of Expression) plainclothes policemen refused to let some participants enter and assaulted several activists, including the head of the Tunisian Journalists Union. He concluded that Tunisia's political system is less a democratic model than a "democratic myth."

Opposition Parties and Human Rights

14. (C) Ben Jaafar clarified that the FDTL does not see democracy as simply the mechanics of elections, but as an atmosphere of freedom of expression. Ben Jaafar lamented that during the lead-up to the 2004 presidential elections, candidates were given airtime on national television, but had to make their remarks in front of a judge who censored their comments before they were aired. He justified the FDTL's boycott of the October 2004 parliamentary elections by saying that the party did not mind waging an uphill battle against better funded larger political opponents, but it would not engage in pre-determined elections. (Note: Since the FDTL boycotted the elections, it has no seats in parliament and no government funding. End Note.)

Extremist Threat

15. (C) Ben Jaafar characterized Tunisia as a moderate country, but cautioned that the GOT's refusal to allow moderate political opposition encourages extremists who paint themselves as catalysts for change and the only viable alternative to the GOT. Ben Jaafar opined that Tunisia owes its current economic prosperity to investments made in education and women's rights fifty years ago. However, today the twin trends of corruption and regressing civil liberties make the country vulnerable to extreme religious ideology. He explained that this was one of the reasons the FDTL joined the October 18 Movement, an alliance of disparate opposition political groups and activists which includes moderate Islamists (Ref B). He offered the Movement's affirmation of women's rights as proof that the group provides a forum for debate that promotes democratic values and discourages extremism.

Comment

16. (C) The difficulties encountered by the FDTL are similar to those of many local and international NGOs operating in Tunisia (see Ref A). Yet, Ben Jaafar avoided directly asking for Embassy assistance. Thus, like many in Tunisian civil society, he continues to seek USG support for political reform, while nonetheless maintaining a clear distance reflecting their opposition to US policies, e.g. on Israel/Palestinian territories and Iraq. End comment.

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